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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000145

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PNAT](#) [PINR](#) [SOCI](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: CHRISTIANS OBJECT TO BERRI'S PROPOSED
DECONFESSIONALIZATION COMMITTEE

REF: BEIRUT 0061

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The 1989 Taif Accord that ended the Lebanese civil war called for "deconfessionalization," the abolishment of the quotas for sectarian representation that undergird the Lebanese political system. Like many tenets in Taif, the proposal has yet to be implemented. Recently, Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, a Shia, publicly proposed forming a committee to study the issue. His advisors argue that the discussion should begin now in order to capitalize on the current period of domestic and regional reconciliation, even if implementation takes "at least a generation." The Christian community, including Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir and Berri's nominal ally Michel Aoun, has strongly rejected Berri's proposal. In particular, Maronite Christians, who would lose some of their disproportionate political clout in a deconfessionalized system, insist that Christian privileges must be protected despite evidence of Christians' declining demographic weight. Christian leaders like Lebanese Forces head Samir Geagea also accuse Berri of raising the issue to distract the government from dealing with Hizballah's weapons. Meanwhile, the Sunnis sit on the sidelines in support of their Christian March 14 allies, while the Druze favor Berri's plan. Like many significant issues in current Lebanese political culture, Berri's proposal will likely be postponed for future decision. End Summary.

BERRI CALLS FOR COMMITTEE TO
STUDY DECONFESSIONALIZATION

12. (SBU) Speaker Berri challenged the basis of the political status quo during the late November parliamentary debate to grant the newly-installed government a vote of confidence when he called for the formation of a committee to study "deconfessionalization." Article 95 of the Lebanese constitution, as amended by the 1989 Taif Accords, calls for the "abolition of political confessionalism according to a transitional plan" under the leadership of the parliament, whose representatives are currently elected on a formula of equal seat distribution between Christians and Muslims. All political positions in Lebanon are currently divided equally between Christians and Muslims, with the Maronite Christians taking the lion's share of the Christian half despite demographic estimates that suggest that their numbers are significantly less than half of the Lebanese population. Berri's proposal only addressed "political"

deconfessionalization -- such as ending confessional quotas for MPs, ministers, and senior civil servants -- not the creation of civil family law to end religious authorities' control over matters of birth, marriage, death and inheritance. As called for by the constitution, Berri proposed forming of a committee headed by President Michel Sleiman that would include representatives of all confessions, members of civil society, religious figures, and academics as a first step to implementing Article 95.

13. (C) Berri's senior advisor, Ali Hamdan, explained to poloffs in late January that Berri sought to urge the Lebanese political establishment to capitalize on regional and domestic reconciliation efforts to begin addressing the controversial issue. When asked why Berri launched his aggressive campaign in the media at this time, Hamdan rhetorically answered, "Why not now?" Full deconfessionalization, as called for in the constitution, would still take "at least a generation," but there would be no better time than the present to begin the dialogue, Hamdan argued. Among the recent positive developments opening the door to Berri's proposals, Hamdan listed regional reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Syria, the two parties who pushed for the 1989 Taif Accord; the formation of a national unity government; and reconciliations among the primary confessions since the June 2009 parliamentary elections.

TIE COMMITTEE FORMATION TO NATIONAL DIALOGUE?

14. (C) The sectarian divide on the topic of deconfessionalization is stark. A recent poll commissioned by Berri from the Lebanese research firm Information International showed that 75% of Muslims support the concept of eliminating sectarianism from political life, with Shia support rising to 89%. Meanwhile, a mere 35% of Christians support addressing the topic now. In response to accusations from March 14-allied Christian leaders that Berri was using the deconfessionalization issue as "political theater" to divert attention away from Hizballah and its arsenal, an exasperated Hamdan complained that "the Christians never want a resolution" to confessionalism, preferring instead to use sectarianism as a "coat rack to hang every problem on." He challenged the Christians to "be brave" by exhibiting creativity and seizing Berri's proposal in order to link their greatest fear -- domination by Hizballah's weapons -- with their most valuable negotiating card, their disproportionate strength in the confessional system. The Speaker, he said, had discussed his proposal with President Sleiman to explain that it was meant to take a step forward in constitutional implementation, but he would not pressure Sleiman to include it on the National Dialogue agenda. (Note: Sleiman, who will lead the Dialogue, was the first to call publicly for the formation of a deconfessionalization committee during his remarks to celebrate Lebanese independence day on November 22, but since then he has not declared any intention to expand the Dialogue's agenda to add deconfessionalization to discussion of the national defense strategy (a euphemism for Hizballah's weapons). End note.)

CHRISTIANS REACTING TO FINAL RESULT RATHER THAN COMMITTEE FORMATION

15. (C) Christian opposition to Berri's plan, although clearly linked to existential Christian fears, has followed two lines of reasoning. Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir and Berri's nominal Christian ally Michel Aoun argue that "now is not the time" to discuss deconfessionalization, revealing an unwillingness among Maronites in particular to reconsider the basis of a state in which they hold disproportionate control. Aoun told the Ambassador in mid-January (reftel) that his Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) was working toward the full secularization of the Lebanese state, but he insisted that the first step is granting "full civil rights to all citizens" before moving to confessional electoral reform. In

his view, ending the confessional quotas is the "last step" in the reform process, not the first, and he has posited repeatedly that sectarianism should be "eliminated from citizens' souls" before being changed on paper.

¶16. (C) A second argument against deconfessionalization is championed by Christians affiliated with March 14, especially Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea (also a Maronite), who echo Aoun's argument while also raising the specter of Hizballah's arms playing an even more prominent role in local political dynamics without the current constitutional guarantees of Christian parity. Geagea instead advocates that each confession vote for its own representatives in the parliament instead of voting by district. Similarly, Kataeb party MPs insist that disarming militias should come before "the last page of Taif" (i.e., deconfessionalization).

¶17. (C) Other objections to Berri's proposal center on his methods or suspicion about his intentions. FPM MP Ibrahim Kenaan asserted to us that Berri should have asked parliament to determine its priorities in implementing Taif before calling for a committee to study deconfessionalization. Ali Hamdan, who proposed that the committee's work could be done "behind closed doors," assessed that the Christians were afraid to "take from Berri's hand even though he's offering something good." Any change to the status quo, Hamdan pointed out, would have to be approved by cabinet and two-thirds of parliament, thus guaranteeing Christians a veto. Meanwhile, some non-Maronite Christians, such as Greek Orthodox and Catholics, privately express support for Berri's proposal, arguing that Berri is willing to negotiate the issue instead of trying to impose change. If the debate is delayed further, Orthodox political figure Marwan Abu Fadel assessed, the next speaker of parliament -- who he believed would likely be a Hizballah appointee -- would not be as friendly to the protests of an even more diminished Christian community.

SUNNIS NON-COMMITTAL,
DRUZE SUPPORTIVE

¶18. (C) While the Shia and the Christians spar over deconfessionalization, Sunni political leaders have been less vocal, with Prime Minister Saad Hariri carefully avoiding the subject in his public statements. Hamdan claimed that Hariri does not oppose Berri's proposal himself, but Hariri's Future Movement officially opposes Berri's initiative, saying "the time is not right" for discussions on the contentious issue. Sunnis nonetheless acknowledge that deconfessionalization will be an important step towards the implementation of Taif, although the personal sentiments of Future Party representatives vary. MP Jamal Jarrah fears that through deconfessionalization, the Shia will take over the country, while MP Mohammad Qabbani told poloff that he personally supports deconfessionalization, which he assessed would actually benefit the better-educated Christians competing in a system rewarding "competence and expertise" instead of religious affiliation. Other majority Sunnis explain privately that Future's official opposition to Berri's proposal is a result of pressure by Hariri's Christian March 14 allies, most notably Geagea, and not from the Sunni base, which the Information International poll showed supports the idea by 63%.

¶19. (C) Meanwhile, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt has publicly supported Berri's proposal, perhaps because a Druze is tipped to head the senate called for in the Taif Accord. Although the Druze account for less than 12% of the Lebanese population by most estimates, 66% are in favor of taking steps to eliminate sectarianism, according to the Information International poll.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: Berri, who acknowledges that deconfessionalization could take "at least 20 to 30 years," made a smart move by calling for the formation of a committee to examine it -- a move that will shore up his Shia base by

showing him to be championing full constitutional implementation. His proposal is unlikely to gain much traction, however, given broad and vocal Christian opposition, even from Berri's own allies. In the face of that opposition and despite his early support for the idea, President Sleiman has not sought to take the lead on this issue of national importance. As a result, the question of deconfessionalization will likely continue to be postponed for a decision at some unspecified time in the future. Berri's proposal and the ruckus it provoked have had one notable short-term effect: they have diverted attention away from discussion of Hizballah's arms. Maybe that's what he intended all along.

DAUGHTON